

**COVENANT SIGN AND SEAL**  
**The Symbolic Significance of Circumcision,**  
**and Its Application to the New Testament Believer**  
**Part 1 of 2**

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**INTRODUCTION**

Circumcision, prescribed by God in Genesis 17, is a significant biblical-theological theme. It is also significant for understanding the sacrament of baptism. Since one's view of the sacrament of baptism is substantially dependent upon how one views the continuity or discontinuity of baptism with the Old Testament practice of circumcision, it is important to understand circumcision in its Old Testament context.

To begin, let me introduce two terms. The first of these is "paedobaptism," which refers to the practice of baptizing children (*paedo* = child). This term signifies one major approach to the subject of baptism. It should be noted, in introducing this term, that there are a variety of approaches to paedobaptism. The paedobaptist view which I will describe, and to some extent defend, is the Reformed view. This view precludes the paedobaptist position of "baptismal regeneration," which is the view that the baptism of children signifies that baptized children are regenerated by or at the point of baptism. Traditions that hold this view include Lutheran and Roman Catholic.

The other major view of baptism is "credobaptism." This is the view that baptism should be administered only to those making a credible profession of faith (*credo* = belief). As in the case of paedobaptism, there are a variety of positions within the credobaptist category. As among paedobaptists, some credobaptists explicitly or implicitly hold to baptismal regeneration. Traditions which generally hold to this view include the Christian Church (e.g. Disciples of Christ, Campbellites) and United Pentecostals.

I will not attempt to critique paedo- or credobaptists who hold to baptismal regeneration, but will assume the basic critique of all baptismal regeneration views which make baptism the agency of salvation. It seems abundantly clear to me that the New Testament (and Old Testament, for that matter) teaches that regeneration is the initiative of God the Holy Spirit upon which faith, the instrumental means of justification, depends. Whether paedo- or credobaptist, we should not make faith dependent upon the external sign, regardless of when it is applied.

My primary goal is to examine Genesis 17 in depth to give provide an understanding of circumcision in the Mosaic Law. Secondly, I hope to give paedobaptists greater confidence in their view, and credobaptists a respect and understanding of paedobaptism's basis even if they do not agree with it in the

end. To be honest, I would not be disappointed if this presentation convinced every reader that Reformed paedobaptism best represents the biblical view on the subject, but that is not really my goal here. If in the end you become or remain a Reformed credobaptist, you will nevertheless deepen your appreciation for what God has done for us in Christ. Lastly, by way of introduction, I refer you to standard works on the subject of paedobaptism to address aspects of the subject I am not addressing.<sup>1</sup>

## CIRCUMCISION IN THE ANCIENT NEAR EAST

We know from extra-biblical literature that circumcision was practiced broadly in the ancient Near East (e.g. Egypt and Mesopotamia) as a puberty or prenuptial rite. It exists as early as 3,000 B.C., possibly originating in Mesopotamia (the region from which Abraham came). In Egypt, it was possibly reserved only for high caste individuals. In any event, there are important differences between the circumcision practices of these cultures and the practice prescribed in Genesis 17 and regulated through the Mosaic Law. While Egyptian circumcision probably only involved a dorsal incision (i.e. a slitting of the foreskin along the top), Hebrew circumcision involved the complete removal of the foreskin.

This difference between Egyptian and Israelite practice may explain Joshua 5:2,9:

“At that time the LORD said to Joshua, ‘Make for yourself flint knives and circumcise again the sons of Israel the second time.’ ... Then the LORD said to Joshua, ‘Today I have rolled away the reproach of Egypt from you.’ So the name of that place is called Gilgal to this day.”

Many interpreters take verse 2 to mean that the second generation, those entering the land under Joshua, had not been circumcised in the wilderness. Under this interpretation, the consequence is that the first generation, in their disobedience, had failed to circumcise their children. Verse 9 expresses the

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<sup>1</sup> These would include, but not be limited to: John Murray, *Christian Baptism* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing); works by Gabriel Marcel, Francis Schaeffer; John P. Sartelle, *What Christians Parents Should Know about Infant Baptism*; O. Palmer Robertson, *Christ of the Covenants* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing); and the treatments contained in standard systematic theologies such as Reymond, Berkhof, C. Hodge, etc. This presentation is intended to supplement those. In those works you will find answers to many questions you might have. For example, you will find exegetical data to show the error of equating the Greek *baptizo* with “immerse.” You will also find that the baptism of the John the Baptist may not be credibly equated to Christian baptism. Regrettably, these standard sources do not provide adequate Old Testament background. For such background, M. G. Kline’s *By Oath Consigned* is particularly helpful.

result of the second generation being circumcised. Incidentally, the Hebrew word for “roll away” is *galal*, providing a word play or pun on the place name “Gilgal.”<sup>2</sup>

But if Joshua 5:2 is read against the background of Egyptian dorsal circumcision, its meaning may be much deeper. It may well be that the Israelites had practiced the Egyptian version of circumcision in the wilderness. Joshua makes clear elsewhere that the Israelites observed worship practices of the Egyptians.<sup>3</sup> I consider it likely that in Joshua 5:2 God commanded Israel to perform his circumcision by removing the entire foreskin. The incised but still-present foreskin of the Egyptian circumcision was a “reproach” (“disgrace,” NRSV) upon Israel. It signified the idolatrous disposition of the first generation.

## **CIRCUMCISION AND THE COVENANT WITH ABRAHAM: GENESIS 17**

Let’s look more closely at the prescribed circumcision given to Abraham in Genesis 17:

### **A. Covenant Elements: Preamble, Stipulations, Curses and Blessings, Perpetuation**

The Hittite suzerainty treaties, which provide the literary/historical context for the covenant with Abraham, included five standard elements:

1. Preamble (identifying the suzerain)
2. Historical prologue (recounting the suzerain’s beneficent dealings with the vassal)
3. Stipulations (stating the suzerain’s requirements of the vassal)
4. Sanctions (blessings for obedience, curses for disobedience)
5. Dynastic disposition (providing for how the relationship is to be perpetuated in the face of changing circumstances)

In Genesis 17 we find the substance of most of these elements.<sup>4</sup> For example, God identifies himself as “God Almighty” (v. 1b). We also find a general stipulation (“Walk before Me, and be blameless,” v. 1c), and the specific

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<sup>2</sup> In typical Old Testament fashion, place and individual names provide reminders of the significance they have for acts of God associated with those places or individuals.

<sup>3</sup> “Now, therefore, fear the LORD and serve Him in sincerity and truth; and put away the gods which your fathers served beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve the LORD.” (Josh. 24:14; cf. Exod. 32).

<sup>4</sup> These elements are descriptive of biblical covenants, not prescriptive. We are not imposing this form upon biblical instances of covenant-making, but using them as a guide to recognize where covenants are ratified in Scripture.

stipulation to keep the sign of circumcision (vv. 10b-14). The sanctions appear in both blessing (v. 8) and curse form (v. 14).

## B. Oaths and Covenants

While the form described above relates to covenant treaty *documents*, such covenants were accompanied by a ratification *ceremony*. In the ceremony the parties would take oaths to signify their entrance into the binding, sanctioned relationship. As in some modern day contractual and covenant practices, the oath consisted primarily in reciting the curse portion of the sanctions. Thus, while the entirety of the covenant relationship was in view, the oaths consisted of reciting the covenant curses. Although somewhat trivial, the common way children attest to what they are saying provides an analogy: “Cross my heart and hope to die, stick a needle in my eye!” Likewise, the once standard practice of swearing in court witnesses with the statement “So help me God” provides a parallel.

In standard ancient Near-Eastern practice, the curses were represented symbolically. In Genesis 15, animals were killed and God passed between their pieces signifying his self-imprecation. The oath/curse symbol represented the fate that the swearer voluntarily assumed should he fail to fulfill the stipulations of the covenant. Kline provides an example from an extra-biblical covenant between Ashnurnirari V and Mati’ilu. Placing his hands upon the head of a ram before it was slaughtered, Mati’ilu stated,

“This head is not the head of a ram; it is the head of Mati’ilu, the head of his sons, his nobles, the people of his land. If this named [sin] against this treaty, as the head of this ram is c[ut off,] his leg put in his mouth [...] so may the head of those named be cut off [...] This shoulder is not the shoulder of a ram, it is the shoulder of the one named [etc].”<sup>5</sup>

Because of the commonness of this practice, the oath/curse became a synecdoche for the covenant.<sup>6</sup> Such is the case in Genesis 17:10 where the circumcision sign is referred to as “my covenant” by God (see also Deut. 29:12 where “covenant” and “oath” are used as parallel terms<sup>7</sup>). Thus, by symbolizing the curse sanctions, circumcision indicated that a descendant of Abraham was under the covenant that God had made with Abraham. The point here is significant: to bear the covenant sign and to be regarded as a member of the covenant was not an automatic guarantee of blessing. It represented *potential* blessing as a result of God’s promise of unique and abundant blessing to

<sup>5</sup> M. G. Kline, *By Oath Consigned*, 41.

<sup>6</sup> A synecdoche is a figure of speech in which a part stands for the whole, such as the expression “wheels” used in reference to a car.

<sup>7</sup> “Parallel” here means that two terms are used in equivalent statements indicating some level of equivalence. It is used primarily to describe one of the fundamental features of Hebrew poetry.

Abraham and his offspring. But it also represented potential *cursing*; being in the covenant did not equate to being blessed.

### **C. Genesis 17: Original Significance**

For Abraham and the original audience of Genesis, circumcision reminded them of many things. One thing in particular that it signified was responsibility, the indispensable response required of everyone who bore the sign. God's covenant with Abraham was certainly gracious, but grace and responsibility are not mutually exclusive. The emphatic "Now as for you..." (v. 9) is issued notwithstanding the divine promises (vv. 6-8).

### **D. The Oath Transaction, i.e. the Act of Circumcision**

Before applying the principles of circumcision to New Testament baptism, we should make several observations about the implications of circumcision.

#### **1. Horizontal: communal aspect**

The first major implication we may note is the communal aspect, or horizontal dimension, of the sign. To receive this sign made one a part of the Abrahamic family, the covenant community. The special blessings which attached to the covenant were only available to those in the covenant. Thus, it was necessary that all under the household covering of Abraham be marked in this way (servants and livestock included). This involved both obligations toward fellow family members as well as risks posed. The blessings of God were not given to those outside this family even though the sign itself was not a guarantor of blessing.

#### **2. Vertical: judicial aspect**

The second major implication is the judicial aspect, or vertical dimension, of the sign. Circumcision signified that a person was under divine authority, subject to all God's commands. It would be inaccurate to describe this rule as strictly a reign of grace. To be sure, the promises were graciously offered, and their proportion well exceeded the value of the obedience rendered. But the sign alone was insufficient to effect blessings. It signified God's reign first and foremost before it signified grace, and the standard for that reign was God's word. The gracious, monergistic nature of the promise did not preclude a works principle in operation because the sign did not preclude the one so marked from being cut off from the covenant.

#### **3. To be "cut off" (Gen. 17:14): circumcision as the symbolic oath of the covenant.**

More particular to the sign itself is the equation of the "cutting off" of the foreskin with exclusion from the covenant community. Just as Joshua 5:9, Genesis 17:14 indicates that circumcision involved the removal of sin. In the

latter instance, one whose foreskin was not “cut off” (i.e. circumcised) was himself to be “cut off” (i.e. exiled) body and soul, from God and his people. To be so cut off was to fall under the covenant’s curses.

#### 4. Consecration

Circumcision also represents consecration. This is implicit in the act of obedience itself. It is explicit in that the removal of the foreskin represents the removal of sin. Leviticus 19:23 is informative here:

“And when you enter the land and plant all kinds of trees for food, then you shall count their fruit as forbidden. Three years it shall be forbidden to you; it shall not be eaten.”

Here the expression used to describe the fruit of the land is literally “you are to regard it as uncircumcised.” “Forbidden” is the correct equivalence here, but the point is that uncircumcision equates to forbidden, and circumcision equates with holiness, as Leviticus 19:24 makes clear:

“But in the fourth year all its fruit shall be holy, an offering of praise to the LORD.”

As in the case of the fruit of the land, the circumcised person was dedicated to the Lord.<sup>8</sup>

This understanding of circumcision is reflected later in the prophet Jeremiah:

“Circumcise yourselves to the LORD  
And remove the foreskins of your heart,  
Men of Judah and inhabitants of Jerusalem,  
Lest My wrath go forth like fire  
And burn with none to quench it,  
Because of the evil of your deeds” (Jer. 4:4).

Likewise, Jesus connected wholeness (a concept belonging to the Levitical law) with circumcision (John 7:23).

This proves significant in view of the fact that the sign represents the oath/curse of the covenant. Only holy things may be consecrated successfully. Otherwise, a holy substitute must be given instead, such as the holy animals of the Levitical law. In the offering of a holy thing in one’s stead, the offerer consecrates himself.

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<sup>8</sup> The concept of holiness primarily has to do with separation from common things and secondarily with moral purity.

## **E. Corporate**

Because circumcision is applied to the reproductive organ of the male, it also signifies the corporate workings of God's covenant. This is true both of the sin factor (circumcision indicates the need for removal of sin) as well as of the consecration factor. In other words, both in sin and salvation God worked through families (cf. Exod. 34:7).

## **F. The Scope of the Sign**

Note that the sign was to be applied to all eight-day-old males (v. 12). This contrasts with the surrounding practices of circumcision as a puberty rite applied at entrance into adulthood, as well as with Egypt's use of circumcision to distinguish caste (in the case of the Abrahamic covenant, it was even open to Gentiles; see Gen. 17:12b). Of course in the New Testament, this egalitarianism is advanced further through the elimination of ethnic and gender distinctions for the common life in the church (Gal. 3:28; Col. 3:11).<sup>9</sup>

## **G. Never Merely Physical**

In the Old Testament, circumcision was never to be regarded as a merely physical act.

“Circumcise then your heart, and stiffen your neck no more” (Deut. 10:16).

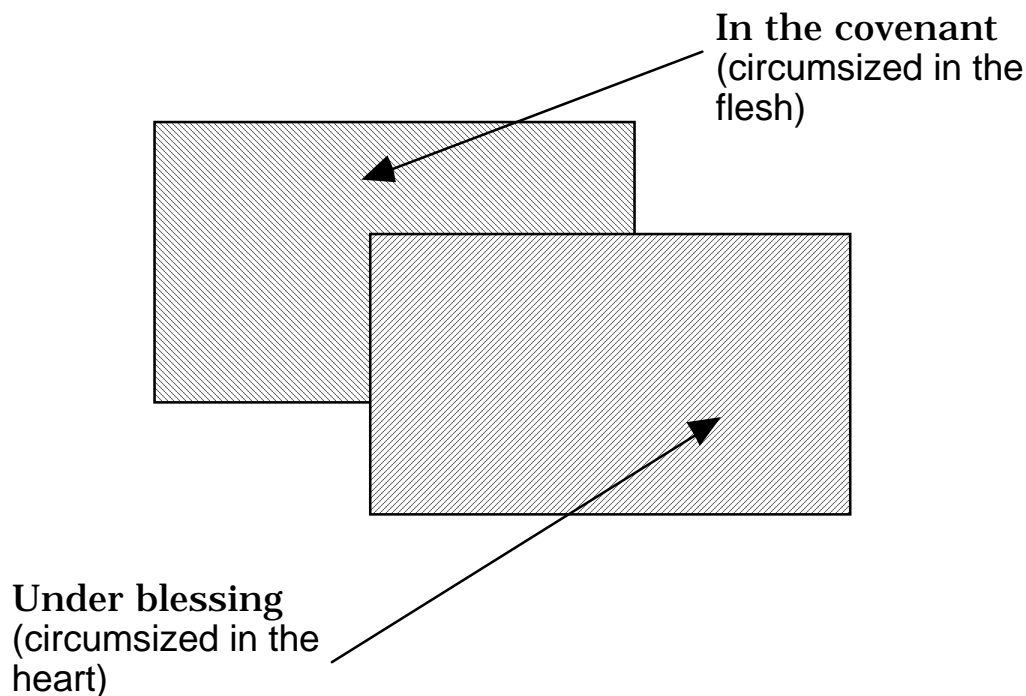
“Moreover the LORD your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your descendants, to love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, in order that you may live” (Deut. 30:6).

“Circumcise yourselves to the LORD And remove the foreskins of your heart, Men of Judah and inhabitants of Jerusalem, Lest My wrath go forth like fire And burn with none to quench it, Because of the evil of your deeds” (Jer. 4:4).

The visible was never to be considered apart from an inward reality. It would be a mistake, therefore, to make this a distinction between Old Testament circumcision and New Testament baptism. Both are intended as outward signs of an inward reality. But there was also, just as with baptism, an acknowledgement that not all who bore the sign would be in possession of the reality. To use New Testament terms, there would be tares among the wheat in Israel. Hence, one must view Israel in the way illustrated below, a distinction identical to that of the visible and invisible church.

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<sup>9</sup> One cannot extrapolate this automatically to issues of hierarchy within the church. Note that where there *is* a gender issues in dispute, Paul omits the male/female portion of his egalitarian formula so as not to be misunderstood as contradicting himself (1 Cor. 12:13).



Paul understood that this distinction belonged to the continuity between Old and New Testaments when he wrote:

“For he is not a Jew who is one outwardly; neither is circumcision that which is outward in the flesh. But he is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is that which is of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter; and his praise is not from men, but from God” (Rom 2:28-29).

“For they are not all Israel who are descended from Israel; neither are they all children because they are Abraham’s descendants, but: ‘through Isaac your descendants will be named.’ That is, it is not the children of the flesh who are children of God, but the children of the promise are regarded as descendants” (Rom. 9:6b-8).

#### **J. Covenant Breakers are “Cut Off”**

By now it should be clear that, though the sign of circumcision was administered according to the command of God, it did not signify blessing alone. It signified *potential curse or blessing*. If those who possessed the sign of the covenant remained covenant breakers, they would eventually be *cut off* from God’s people.<sup>10</sup> The curse symbolized in the oath sign would become a reality.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Exod. 12:15; 12:19; 30:33; 30:38; 31:14; Lev. 7:20; 7:21; 7:25; 7:27; 17:4; 17:9; 17:10; 17:14; 18:29; 19:8; 20:3; 20:5; 20:6; 20:17; 20:18; 22:3; 23:29; Num. 4:18; 9:13; 15:30; 15:31; 19:13; 19:20; Judg. 21:6; 1Sam. 2:33; Pss. 37:9,22,28.

Where circumcision did not signify the actual removal of sin from an individual because the individual did not act on the promises by faith, circumcision represented that person's removal from the people of God.